

THE Hampstead mansion where squatters are living rent-free with the blessing of the house's owners turned into a media circus this weekend, with journalists making "donations" in exchange for tours of their home.

Since the Ham&High reported last week that squatters had moved into the Fitzjohn's Avenue mansion the group known as the Circle Community have been the focus of mass-media attention.

On Wednesday last week, the group signed a groundbreaking agreement with the house's owners, Circle Anglia (formerly Circle 33) housing association – and can now stay free-of-charge in exchange for maintaining and securing the five-storey 10-apartment house.

At the weekend, journalists from the Daily Mirror, The Guardian, the Daily Star, the Daily Express, ITV and LBC were taken on tours of the house in exchange for "donations to the community" of up to £450 on publication.

Phoenix, who has spent 14 years squatting in Camden including homes in Tufnell Park and Highgate, said: "The message we want to get out is that of Agenda 21. I am blue in the face telling journalists about these issues."

"We are a sustainable community, an example of how sustainable communities can live. For every homeless family in Britain there are two empty homes and that is not right."

"Before we show you around we would ask that you give a donation to our community of £50, £100 or whatever."

The group are part of the Circle Community (no relation to Circle Anglia), who previously took over a disused Grade II-listed former drama school on the Prince of Wales Road, St George's Theatre in Tufnell Park and an empty Jewish school on Finchley Road.

In the previous squats the group ran community projects.

Phoenix said the Fitzjohn's Avenue house is a "home squat", not a "project squat", but added that everyone living in the house was involved in the group's "environmental projects".

Phoenix said: "The money we have received so far will be put towards our environmental cause, but most of it hasn't arrived yet."

Fitzjohn's Avenue residents are happy with their new neighbours, and the group has received support from the Green Party.

Sian Berry, principal speaker for the Green Party, said: "These squatters generally do have a very good reputation for community events."

"We support the general aim of keeping the buildings in use. Having people like that move in to look after them is a great idea."

"Obviously, the property developer in general does not want people there who are not paying rent, but the point is to keep the building in use."

Since 1927 United Women's Housing Association housed single women on low incomes in the house, but it has been empty since December last year.

In 2005 the house was sold to Circle Anglia, in a deal with the Land Registry

as worth £8.8million.

Circle Anglia says this included 14 other properties and the house is actually worth £1.1million with the current restrictions on use.

But one Hampstead estate agent we contacted this week said the house could fetch up to £5million if the restrictions were lifted.

In February the housing association asked auctioneers to sell the

house, but after discussions with Camden Council, decided to retain it for social housing.

Kim Parkins, Circle Anglia managing director, said: "This agreement is a creative and pragmatic response in the circumstances, as neighbours have been fully consulted about the action."

"It allows the building to be secured and maintained while

planning for its future is still underway."

Circle Anglia say the deal is saving it £6,000 a week in security costs.

The association says work to convert the house into four four-bedroom apartments and one studio will begin in March 2007.

Phoenix said: "I don't know why Circle Anglia is taking so

long to sort the house out whilst they are, it has been home for 14 families."

One anonymous source contacted the Ham&High said: "We are trying to survive in London and just want to be in peace. All this media has endangered our lives."

marc.mullen@hamhigh.co.uk

A short history of the Circle Community's squatting life

- In the 1990s squatters took over the Highgate Road Baptist Church, turning it into the Rainbow Centre project.
- From October 2004 to November 2005, the group squatted the Grade II-listed Athlone House, the former hospital on Hampstead Heath, was the next stop until December 21, the winter solstice, when developers behind the luxury flat St George's theatre in Tufnell Park.
- The group then moved to a disused former Jewish school, just off Finchley Road, from where they were evicted by the building's owners Freshwater.
- They promptly moved into another school building also owned by Freshwater but were evicted in a record three and a half weeks.
- In June 2006 the group moved into their des res on the Fitzjohn's Avenue.
- They stayed briefly in another Grade II-listed building, the former drama school on the Prince of Wales Road.